

**Testimony by United States Agency for International Development  
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“The Endangered Children of Northern Uganda”  
House International Relations Committee  
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations  
Chairman Christopher H. Smith  
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**Introduction**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today’s hearing. Northern Uganda remains one of the world’s least publicized humanitarian emergencies with 1.5 million or more persons internally displaced by ongoing conflict. I have seen first-hand the situation in Northern Uganda, and I can assure you that this is a conflict that merits the close attention of this Subcommittee. Thank you for convening this hearing.

My testimony on behalf of USAID today seeks to summarize key aspects of the humanitarian emergency and our response to it.

**Lord’s Resistance Army**

The United States National Security Strategy specifically refers to the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) as a regional challenge that demands attention. The Strategy accurately states that “In Uganda, a barbaric rebel cult – the Lord’s Resistance Army – is exploiting a regional conflict and terrorizing a vulnerable population.”

It is clear that Northern Uganda’s population continues to live in abject fear of continued attacks by the LRA, whose utter brutality against civilians is well-documented and well-known by this Subcommittee. The LRA has committed widespread serious abuses and atrocities, including the abduction, rape, maiming, mutilation and killing of civilians, including children. The LRA uses children as soldiers, holds children and others in slave-like conditions, and subjects female captives to rape and other forms of severe sexual exploitation. The LRA has abducted some 25,000 children during the course of the conflict, according to UNICEF; other estimates are even higher. Although LRA activities in Northern Uganda have diminished during the recent dry season, LRA combatants reportedly remain in the vicinity of many displacement sites, and residents are fearful that random LRA attacks and atrocities could resume.

The LRA is a sub-regional issue that must be addressed. The LRA now threaten regional stability not only in Uganda, but in the volatile regions of southern Sudan and eastern Congo. The latter two countries are emerging, we hope, from long periods of warfare with heavy US investment in securing a peace. In particular, it threatens the fragile political situation in Sudan and implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Overall, LRA activity in Northern Uganda and southern Sudan limits humanitarian

access; blocks trans-border market and logistics routes; and limits agricultural production and trade.

### **Humanitarian Conditions**

Most of the estimated 1.5 million persons displaced during Northern Uganda's conflict continue to live in deplorable conditions, scattered among more than 200 camps. With more than 90 percent of the population pushed from their homes in several districts, population density in Northern Uganda's overcrowded camps is virtually unprecedented even by international emergency standards.

The international relief community depends on measurements of mortality rates to obtain essential information about how well the affected population is surviving and what more needs to be done. Therefore, it was highly significant when a much-anticipated study of mortality levels in Northern Ugandan camps in 2005 found that mortality rates among the displaced population averaged 1.54 deaths per day per 10,000 people, significantly above the commonly used emergency threshold of 1 death per day, and more than triple the normal expected death rate in non-emergency communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Among children under age five, mortality rates in Northern Uganda's conflict zone were even more tragic, averaging 3.18 deaths per day per 10,000 children. These mortality rates translate into more than 900 excess deaths per week among displaced Ugandans.

It is important to note that this mortality data is the product of a study conducted in 2005 under the auspices of the Ugandan Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Food Program (WFP), the UN Population Fund, and the International Rescue Committee. Health experts within the USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) with vast experience in health surveys have examined the Northern Uganda mortality study and have concluded that the survey is methodologically sound and arrives at credible conclusions. A USAID health expert in Uganda earlier this month further examined health conditions in the North, closely reviewed Government of Uganda concerns about the study's approach, and has also concluded that the mortality survey was conducted according to standard practices. Regular measurements of basic health indicators, including mortality rates, are a fundamentally important component in mounting a well-informed, well-calibrated humanitarian response in crisis situations.

I am sorry to report that these grim mortality measurements tend to confirm what USAID has known for some time – that seriously substandard conditions at displacement camps have exacted a deadly toll on Northern Uganda's population. Even when compared to other humanitarian emergencies, Northern Uganda's camps are woefully deficient in the provision of water for drinking and bathing, latrines for adequate sanitation, and basic living space for physical and mental well-being. The uprooted population, deprived of any semblance of normal life, is overwhelmingly dependent on relief deliveries. More than 70 percent of displaced households in Northern Uganda have absolutely no income or earn negligible amounts equivalent to less than \$6 per month, according to a comprehensive survey conducted last year with support from USAID.

These conditions clearly indicate the challenges confronting the Government of Uganda, international donors, and the United Nations.

## **Protection Issues**

Mr. Chairman, as you may know, USAID has made a concerted effort in recent years to be more mindful of the serious protection problems confronting many of the needy populations we serve. We know from experience that displaced populations worldwide are particularly vulnerable to physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and other violations of their basic rights. USAID adopted an official policy on assistance to internally displaced persons in 2004 that explicitly acknowledges USAID's responsibility to devise programming strategies within its mandate to try to help vulnerable populations better manage the security risks they face.

In line with this USAID responsibility, we have conducted two on-the-ground assessments of protection issues in Northern Uganda during the past year, including an assessment last month led by the USAID/OFDA Senior Advisor on Internal Displacement and Protection. The United States Government also participated in a recent multi-donor/multi-agency assessment of displacement, under the leadership of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to refine the international community's approach to internally displaced persons.

USAID's two protection assessments in Northern Uganda found that while displaced Ugandans express appreciation that government soldiers and government-supported local defense units offer some security from LRA attacks, mistreatment of camp residents by some of those same Ugandan government security personnel remains a continuing problem. Citizens in Northern Uganda complain frequently of mistreatment by security personnel, and say that neither the Uganda Peoples Defense Force (UPDF) nor the judicial system offers an adequate mechanism for addressing these complaints. The UPDF has taken strong measures against some perpetrators, and has even executed soldiers convicted of these offenses. However, in other cases there has been no effective action against those responsible.

In the three Acholi districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, where most displacement is concentrated, Ugandan government restrictions limit residents' movements outside the camps to a few kilometers during daylight hours. While tight controls on civilian movement are meant to protect the population and hamper the LRA, many Northern Ugandans report that as a result they are unable to engage in livelihood activities such as farming and trade. Some 40 percent of camp occupants report that they are afraid to use their camp's water point. More than 40 percent state that living in a camp is as dangerous, or more dangerous, than returning to their home.

USAID will work closely with Ugandan officials at all levels to support greater freedom of movement to the displaced population in accordance with the Government of Uganda's national policy on internal displacement, which states that "freedom of movement is a fundamental human right of all Ugandans, including internally displaced

persons.” Easing restrictions on movement would allow more displaced families to engage in agricultural activities that would improve food security and household incomes, lessen the population’s pervasive sense of entrapped dependency, and embolden a percentage of displaced persons to begin returning voluntarily to their nearby homes if and when security conditions permit.

USAID welcomes the Government of Uganda’s plans to establish “Civil-Military Coordination Centers” and “Subcommittees on Human Rights Promotion and Protection” to monitor, report, and resolve protection problems and facilitate accountability. USAID will work with the Government of Uganda to help implement such plans effectively. Improved protection and disciplined behavior by government security personnel should be achievable and would build confidence within the displaced population, reduce tensions in camps, increase access to livelihood opportunities, and would serve as an important step forward in fostering reconciliation between the northern population and their national government.

### **USAID Assistance to Northern Uganda**

Mr. Chairman, Northern Uganda has an enormous ongoing need for emergency humanitarian relief as well as long-term development assistance. During the many years of conflict and massive population displacement in the North, the government of Uganda and the international humanitarian assistance community as a whole have failed to respond commensurate to the needs on the ground. USAID realizes that more needs to be done to help the people of Northern Uganda.

That is why the USAID Mission in Uganda, working closely with USAID/Washington, during the past year has developed an action plan for the North which is being institutionalized into a core strategic objective to mitigate the causes and consequences of conflict and will channel additional USAID staffing and financial resources to the affected area. The USAID Mission in Uganda will seek to focus more strategically on increasing access to essential services, enhancing the protection of individuals from physical and psychological violence to the extent possible, advancing peace and reconciliation processes, restoring food security and basic economic activity, and help displaced families voluntarily return home and reintegrate when safe and appropriate to do so. The Agency is determined to make a more significant dent in the miserable human conditions that dominate the daily existence of Northern Uganda’s people.

State Department support of the International Committee of the Red Cross (through the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration) benefited the internally displaced persons; earmarked funds for that purpose reached \$4 million in FY 05. USAID also provided \$78 million to relief and development programs in Northern Uganda during FY 2005 and hopes to provide a similar or larger amount during FY 2006. The largest component of USAID assistance is food aid. USAID’s Office of Food for Peace (USAID/FFP) provided 79,000 metric tons in FY 2005 valued at \$47.6 million and continues to work through the World Food Program (WFP) in FY 2006 to deliver food to nearly 1.5 million displaced persons and more than 160,000 refugees and other

vulnerable persons in the North. USAID/FFP has provided 26 percent of the total funding and metric tonnage requested by WFP for 2006, nearly twice the amount provided by the next three largest donor nations combined. In addition to food for general distributions, supplementary and therapeutic feeding, school feeding, and HIV/AIDS programs, USAID/FFP this year will work with WFP to supply three-month return rations to families planning to return home voluntarily from camps, primarily in Northern Uganda's Lira district. USAID/FFP anticipates that food dependency will decline somewhat as more displaced households gain access to farm land to meet a larger proportion of their own food needs.

The second-largest component of USAID assistance to Northern Uganda is non-food humanitarian assistance provided by USAID/OFDA, which has steered the bulk of its support in recent years toward desperately needed water and sanitation projects in displacement camps, as well as health and nutrition programs. In FY 2006, USAID/OFDA has also begun to support small-scale food security programs that will enable camp residents to produce limited amounts of food. USAID/OFDA provided \$11.8 million to Northern Ugandan programs during FY 2005. USAID/OFDA is currently planning a response of \$6-8 million in FY 2006 depending upon circumstances and needs in other countries.

The USAID Mission in Uganda is significantly increasing its support in FY 2006 for HIV/AIDS programs and anti-malarial projects in the North, where malaria and AIDS rank as the two leading causes of death. Through the President's Malaria Initiative, USAID is distributing insecticide-treated mosquito netting to 85 percent of the dwellings in displacement camps. USAID is also funding HIV/AIDS programs targeting the North, as part of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. This includes funding for the start-up of a \$30 million, five-year program focused on delivery of services for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and Orphans and Vulnerable Children in conflict-affected districts of Northern Uganda.

In addition, USAID is supporting programs ranging from strengthening of governmental decentralization and teacher training, to infrastructure support and long-term agricultural development focused on increasing opportunities for food security and income generation through effective use of food and cash crops. USAID's Northern Uganda Peace Initiative continues to provide technical assistance to promote conflict resolution and reconciliation at local and national levels.

Mr. Chairman, I know that this hearing and indeed this entire Subcommittee has a special interest in the plight of Northern Uganda's endangered children. USAID has initiated a Community Resilience and Dialogue program in recent years that includes assistance for formerly abducted children and adults who have escaped the LRA to reunite with their families. USAID's Displaced Children and Orphans Fund and its Victims of Torture fund have contributed toward these efforts during the past six years.

The LRA uses abductions to force children into servitude as fighters, porters, manual laborers in base camps, and – in the case of female abductees – as sex slaves. Many

young girls held captive have become pregnant with the children of LRA combatants. These girls and their children face significant challenges trying to reintegrate into communities, a process made all the more difficult by the displacement and destitution still suffered by many of the abductees' families. About 40 percent of the ex-abductees pass through reception centers for several weeks – three such centers are supported by USAID and its implementing partners who provide technical oversight – where programs partially address the traumatized youths' considerable health, nutritional, and psychosocial needs before the children reunite with their families, often aided by family tracing services. Experience has shown that traditional cleansing ceremonies are an important aspect in easing the shame and stigma that many returnees encounter. The USAID Community Resilience and Dialogue program has supported skills training and paid school fees for ex-abductees, provided scholastic materials, and has rehabilitated schools.

USAID continues to provide support to several “night commuter” centers where thousands of Northern Ugandan children walk each evening to spend the night sleeping in safety from LRA attacks. The number of children registering at night commuter centers has declined by about one-third during the past six months, to approximately 19,000. The decline might be a tentative sign that the northern population is gradually gaining a stronger sense of security. However, we know that the numbers of “night commuters” can fluctuate significantly depending on events. Therefore the sad spectacle of parents having to send their children several miles away to sleep safely at separate locations each night is a phenomenon that will likely continue. Many relief workers and child experts are increasingly concerned that the “night commuting” phenomenon might be producing secondary negative emotional and social effects on some of the children.

The efforts by USAID and its implementing partners have helped thousands of ex-abductees. However, these efforts have by no means been adequate considering the large number of abducted children – unprecedented in any other conflict – and the horrific perversities that the LRA inflicted on many of the children, compounded by the instability that continues to make a return to normal life difficult if not impossible even after children and young adults have managed to escape the grasp of the LRA.

### **The Way Forward**

USAID is acutely aware that its ability to help bring dramatic improvements to the lives of Northern Ugandans is limited until the LRA conflict ends either by military or political means. Within USAID's mandate, here is our thinking about the way forward.

Mr. Chairman, more needs to be done in Northern Uganda. In addition to the aid that USAID is providing, other donor countries, UN humanitarian agencies, and the Government of Uganda itself need to do more. Northern Uganda contains, by some independent estimates, the third largest displaced population in the world. It is worth noting that Uganda and its neighboring countries of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo collectively account for nearly four of every ten internally displaced people on this planet. It is also worth noting that the LRA operates in all three of those

countries, ruthlessly exploiting the regional instability that it helps to create and sustain. The LRA has ruthlessly earned its place on the U.S. Government's Terrorist Exclusion List.

First, as mentioned earlier, the USAID Mission in Uganda is making budgetary and staffing adjustments to strengthen its ability to respond in Northern Uganda. USAID must maintain and expand emergency relief efforts while also preparing for a transition to reintegration and long-term development where appropriate. USAID is committed to doing what it can within its budget and mandate. We will be pleased to keep the Subcommittee informed as this process evolves.

Secondly, all USAID relief and development programs in Northern Uganda will make a heightened effort to analyze the population's protection problems and integrate those concerns into our programming. We know, for example, that improved water programs can help protect displaced populations by reducing their need to seek water at dangerous locations outside of camps. Basic health programs can do a better job of identifying and treating rape victims. Food rations can be distributed in ways that reduce the risk of theft or exploitation. In addition, we are in regular contact with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and UNICEF as those three agencies become more engaged in monitoring, documenting, and helping to resolve protection and human rights problems in the North. USAID strongly supports UN officials' new efforts to work with Ugandan authorities to secure greater freedom of movement for camp occupants.

Moreover, addressing the LRA issue is critical to advance U.S. national interests in the sub-region, reintegrate 1.5 million displaced persons, and address the recurring drain on humanitarian assistance funds. USAID believes that efforts to "push" the LRA through military and diplomatic pressure should be complemented by stronger efforts to "pull" non-indicted LRA commanders away from the LRA by persuading them to defect. Many mid-level LRA commanders choose to leave the LRA when opportunity permits, and experience suggests that such commanders tend to bring, on average, groups of about 20 LRA members with them when they defect. According to a recent study about LRA defectors, rebel commanders tend to be more ready to escape and return home when they are confident that physical security, freedom, and livelihood opportunities await them in civilian life in Northern Uganda. Thorough and accurate information about the Ugandan government's amnesty and reintegration process is the most significant factor encouraging commanders to defect, according to the study entitled "Opportunities for Peace in Northern Uganda" conducted by Conciliation Resources and Quaker Peace & Social Witness. Therefore, more effort is needed to disseminate information about demobilization and reintegration programs for LRA ex-combatants, and specialized support is required immediately to improve those reintegration programs.

Additionally, USAID and the Department of State Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (State/PRM) have closely collaborated to push the UN to improve its global humanitarian response system to make UN agencies better coordinated and more accountable in response to the needs of the internally displaced. Such UN reforms are

particularly crucial in Northern Uganda because of the UN system's weak performance there addressing the needs of internally displaced persons over the years. The UN has appropriately chosen Northern Uganda as a prime location to introduce one of the humanitarian reforms during 2006, known as the "cluster leads strategy", which we believe will make the response by the UN humanitarian community more predictable and the UN agencies more accountable. USAID and State/PRM have fielded two joint assessment teams during the past three months to monitor UN reform efforts and help push the process forward. We believe it is absolutely crucial that UN humanitarian agencies become more effective in the Northern Uganda crisis. That will require agreement with the Government of Uganda and appointment by the UN of a strong humanitarian coordinator.

USAID welcomes indications from the Government of Uganda that it intends to intensify its efforts in the North. The Ugandan government last year unveiled an excellent overall "National Policy for Internally Displaced Persons" that largely remains to be implemented in practice. Helping the Ugandan government activate its displacement policy remains a high priority for USAID, the UN and other major donors.

In March 2006, Ugandan authorities in consultation with bilateral and multilateral partners – including the U.S. Government – prepared an "Emergency Plan for Humanitarian Interventions in LRA-Affected Areas of Northern Uganda" and designated a Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) to set performance benchmarks. The JMC includes the U.S. Government, the governments of the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Norway, and South Africa, and representatives of the World Bank, the UN, and civil society. The Emergency Plan pledges intensified efforts by the Ugandan government to end the conflict in the North and lay the groundwork for reconciliation and ex-combatant reintegration. The Action Plan commits the Government of Uganda to enhance protection of displaced populations and improve camp conditions. It is noteworthy that the new Emergency Plan commits the Ugandan government "to increased funding for interventions identified in the Action Plan." USAID will work closely with the Government of Uganda to take concrete actions which produce tangible results through the JMC and to fulfill its primary responsibility for the protection of its citizens. In addition, the Government of Uganda in the coming months will finalize a comprehensive National Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan for Northern Uganda which USAID hopes will provide an even more detailed picture of the Ugandan government's plans and commitment to the North.

Lastly, access to displaced populations for purposes of assessing needs, documentation and analysis of protection problems, design and implementation of assistance programs, and evaluation of projects is absolutely essential to everything that USAID and its implementing partners are attempting to do in Northern Uganda. Therefore, signs of increased tensions between the Government of Uganda and international relief agencies are troubling and will, we hope, be resolved in a manner that best serves the considerable needs of Northern Uganda's large, vulnerable population.



Plans by the Ugandan military to reduce military escorts for humanitarian relief convoys, for example, are understandable in light of recent security improvements at some locations. However, such decisions should, USAID believes, occur as part of a consultative process that seriously considers the safety concerns of humanitarian agencies in the field, some of whom suffered deadly highway ambushes just five months ago.

The Department of State's testimony refers to recently passed Ugandan legislation that would impose tighter licensing and permit rules on non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This has raised concerns among local and international relief organizations that Ugandan officials are seeking greater control over some agencies' information collection and advocacy efforts on behalf of Northern Uganda's conflict victims. USAID believes that the ability to independently collect, analyze and make public information on the humanitarian crisis, subject to principles of political neutrality, impartiality, and accuracy, is essential to providing the most appropriate response commensurate with the scale of the crisis. USAID will work closely with Ugandan authorities to promote a process for strengthening collaboration between nongovernmental organizations and the Government of Uganda, including institutionalized channels of regular communication and adequate representation of NGO viewpoints. The U.S. Government and no doubt other donors would welcome the opportunity to foster dialogue and continued good relations between the Government of Uganda and the organizations working to provide assistance to the Ugandan people.

Mr. Chairman, the Lord's Resistance Army has terrorized the people of Northern Uganda for too long. There are signs the LRA is now on the run. The Government of Uganda and the international community need to step up efforts to end the conflict, support the displaced as they remain in camps or as they voluntarily return home, and heal the physical and psychological wounds of this terrible tragedy. Far too many people continue to perish, and far too many survivors are forced to lead a miserable and fearful daily existence. Only the full restoration of peace and security will eliminate the current emergency in the North. Until that time comes, USAID is determined to effectively respond to what remains one of the most overlooked humanitarian crises in the world. Given the complexity of moving forward, we welcome the opportunity to continue working in strong partnership with the Government of Uganda in the future.

I welcome your questions on my testimony or any others you might have for me at this time.